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Joe Strummer Interview

by Judy McGuire

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Editor's note: Judy McGuire conducted this interview, which has never been published before, a few years ago. We're posting it now to pay tribute to one of the true good guys in punk rock. Yeah, of course he made great music. But when someone is a good person on top of having talent it's a truly special thing.

It's always scary to meet people you admire as much as I admired Joe Strummer. He was the closest thing to having a hero I ever had. When I got the assignment to interview him, I was both excited and scared shitless. What if he was nasty or rude to me? I'd be crushed. Words can't truly express what a huge influence the Clash had on my life. I was a painfully shy, depressed, awkward teenager the first time I heard them. They taught me about politics, to think for myself, to question authority, and to become a better, more informed person. Their lyrics gave me the courage to stop caring what other people thought about me and to always be true to myself.

By the time the interview time rolled around, I'd worked myself into such a nervous tizzy that I thought I might vomit. Despite my major (and glaringly obvious) spazzout, Joe was extremely kind to me and actually seemed kind of flattered, rather than alarmed, at my lack of composure. He didn't even wince when I yelled "I love you!" at him. (Truly a high point in my journalistic career.) He answered all my questions respectfully and kindly (even the really dumb ones about his teeth). When we were done, he hugged me goodbye. It was one of the best days of my life. And yeah, I know I sound like a mouth-breathing fangirl-so what? The world is truly a lesser place for his absence.

I saw the Clash twice and both times were at Bond's. My friend Ilisa and I cut school and waited on line all day. We were so excited.

Wow, a Bond's veteran. Brilliant. What a day that was.

Then I got back home to New Jersey and all my friends had bought tickets over the phone.

No, no, no. Well you did the best thing though. You earned your ticket.

I gotta tell you, this is the first interview I've ever been nervous about.

No, don't be silly. Don't be silly.

What is it like to have had such an influence on so many people - to have had such a huge influence in so many people's lives. Do you feel responsibility? Pressure?

Yeah, all those things, responsibility, pressure. It's a bit stressful. I try and come to terms with it by not thinking about it. It is dangerous not to know your position in the world; i.e., your position with respect to the relationship between your work and what you do and the real world. I like to keep my feet on the ground, so I denigrate it a bit so that I'm not floating off in a cloud of self-congratulation which is an alien thing to do if you're trying to write or play music, although having self confidence is good. There's got to be a limit to it. You cannot float away patting yourself on the back. Anyway, it's a long time ago. It's almost someone else's history.

Why do you think there's this big resurgence in interest in the Clash? Why now? There was just a big cover story in MOJO magazine...

It is a coincidence because we've been trying to get that Clash live album together for about four years. It's one of those things where nothing ever happens. I was avoiding it to be honest, because I couldn't stand going back to the past.

But I saw the Mescaleros show a month or so ago and you played a bunch of Clash songs.

Right, right. You bet we're gonna do that. We're gonna do that more. I wanna play the songs. You see, it suddenly occurred to me that the songs aren't just stuff that's written on a bit of paper or put on a record. What if a song is like a person? Like a song might have some sort of - talking in a fanciful way - it might have a store of kinetic energy of a kind that we can't, that we haven't managed to quantify or identify. And it felt to me, like when we play "White Man in Hammersmith Palais," it plays itself. It wants to be played.

Occasionally I'll wake up in the night and think of a song that I've forgotten all about. It's almost like people ringing you up. I know it sounds ridiculous. It's part of your life - it's part of my life - some guy working on this block might've heard it. Imagine if on some level, like a world wide web of feelings. A lot of people kissed and smoked and danced - had their first experiences of the adult world to these songs. And they're really potent in a psychic - I mean I don't know nothing about this world - but I feel that they demand to be played. And I'm more than happy to play them. 'Cause they're really well-made songs. They don't have sloppy bits where everything goes wobbly. And also you can expand on them. Like sometimes the Mescaleros do "Straight to Hell" - we can play it for three weeks. Sometimes we have to beg each other to stop playing it and then someone will keep going and it'll start all over again. Know what I mean? Seems to have its own life, which I like. And we play them differently every night as well, which is again a thing I really like.

When you guys played "White Man" that night I was so happy I thought I would pop.

Oh, up at the Irving, nice place, innit it? I always love to go see bands there as well, I like the upper balconies so if you can't see down there you can fight your way and see up there.

[Looks in his bag for a minute and pulls out a book.]

Oh yeah, this is funny, I bought this in the airport. "Alright innit?" I can't believe it. The whole book is full of the most funny things. It's for Americans coming to Britain. Look at this, this is in a phrase book - read that for a bloody thing in a phrase book. They've gotta be kidding. Someone is having a laugh, it can't be serious. What the fuck was that about. It's amazing. I began thinking there should be an American phrase book, 'cause I've got an Italian phrase book, and an Arabic one... now a British one. I think it'd be pretty good to have an American phrase book.

Well, I started to work with this guy on films. A guy called F.J. Ossang - he's a very excitable person and he took me to the Atacona Desert last year to make a film called "Dr. Chance." Northern Chile and then some - I would never think to go there, it was just incredible to go there. Next stop, Uzbekistan.

Do you like being in movies?

I only like being in Ossang's movies cause they're unintelligible.

And you feel that's important?

Yeah. I went to Hollywood and saw them editing a big hit movie recently. They were showing it to seventeen-year olds every Wednesday night, doing questionnaires and a focus group with

it to seventeen-year olds every Wednesday night, doing questionnaires and a focus group with say twenty of them and then they were re-editing the movie between the Wednesdays. That took eight weeks. So before that started we had this kind of movie. And then eight weeks later we had that kind of movie, which went out and was a success. But I started to think, there's no bloody risk here. And when we were seventeen we wanted to see grown-up movies with grown-up things. I wanted to see movies I didn't understand like "Clockwork Orange" - it's your coming of age. And here we're just pandering to bloody seventeen-year-olds all the time. No one's gonna learn nothing. So when Ossang and I hooked up, I realized that this is the kind of thing that is a nice counterbalance to the other.

To tell a funny story that happened - they premiered "Dr. Chance" at the London Film Festival. After the film - there's about a thousand people in the house - me and Ossang got up on the stage and they opened the floor to questions. The whole audience sat there like that. Like that. Not daring to move a muscle. Cause no one could understand what the fuck had just gone on.

They didn't want to seem like dummies.

Yeah, not a man or woman spoke. And me and Ossang were standing there. And they went so, perhaps you could tell us what the film's about. I had no fucking idea what the film was about! I was trying to get hold of it as it was. Then I felt, this is the proper behavior for a rock 'n' roller - to get involved in this type of thing.

I want to talk about the conflict between art & commerce. How do you think the need to make money affects art? Have you let it affect your art?

Well, now you're talking to a man who forewent the royalties on Sandinista so that the whole spread of it could be affordable to the normal person. So I am probably one of the more interesting people you could ask that question to. I took it in the neck for the sake of the art and I wouldn't change a thing now, going back. People today say, oh you're fucking crazy or you must've been insane.

Hell, I ain't got six homes on six continents... I have a weird life because I live on songwriting royalties, which are a strange income. Sometimes it rains, sometimes it doesn't. You never know where you are. Having said that, I still wouldn't change anything about the Clash experience at all. It's all part and parcel to me; the glory, the meeting the people, the rocking the houses all over the US - that is part and parcel of taking no royalties on Sandinista, getting a knock on London Calling. That is all part of one thing in life. It was an amazing thing.

Even my mom - she hated the music I was listening to, but even she had to like you guys after you spread out the Bonds' shows so everyone could see you.

Oh cool, even your mom, eh? Good, big up your mom then. My parents are dead too.

What about your kids? How many do you have?

I got three girls, fifteen, thirteen and a stepdaughter of seven. And the truth is, they're all into punk rock, although I never said nothing about it. They're into Blink 182.

That doesn't make any sense.

Hey, they're teenagers, it ain't supposed to, is it? Don't ask me, I'm only their dad.

How do they feel about having punk rock icon dad?

They feel it's slightly embarrassing. But it's okay.

I could see that.

I could see it too. Hey, kids today - oy vey, what can you do?

Do they come to see you play?

Yeah, they've seen some shows. They're not overly impressed, but teenagers are pretty cool these days, I mean pretty chilled.

What have you mainly been doing - I know one solo record, some things with Pogues...

I'm a lazy sod is the truth. I did have a stumble in the business end of things; I had to wait out a contract, which took some years. So there was no way forward for a while. But I quite appreciated the break that gave me because I had a wild five years with the Clash. A lot of songs, a lot of yakking. Part of me felt it was time to shut up for a bit. And then other parts felt let someone else have a go. I had this business contract thing which blocked me up for a while, so it was kind of a good because I needed a break. And also, I wanted to see my kids grow up, ya know?

Did you have a George Michael thing happening?

Exactly the same contract.

How come you had it and Mick Jones could put out records?

Just to try and put it briefly; I inherited the descendent of the Clash contract. Which meant they thought there was going to be huge returns so they offer you huge advances to make the records, right? I put out a record in 1989 called Earthquake Weather, which didn't sell any copies at all. So Sony thought, we can't let this bloke make another record because the wording of the contract was that as soon as I started a session they had to write me an enormous advance check. And they knew they weren't going to see any of it. Why not throw two hundred grand out the window, why don't you?

So they made sure I couldn't go into a studio, 'cause they didn't want to trigger that thing. It took me years to figure out that I just had to sign a paper and then they gave me my separate life back-my solo life. So then I was free and could sign with Helicat. In order to do that I had to agree that if the Clash ever re-formed, Sony owns the ass of the Clash. See what I mean? I think I coulda figured that out quicker, but I'm not that quick. The years of non-action helped, cause then they thought, ugh, get him outta here, he's annoying us. But I saw George lose that case and lose five million and I thought it was a scandal. He had a good point. It's ridiculous.

I've heard you say that the Clash will not re-form?

Um, Cleveland, Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, 2017. 1-2-3-4.

I don't know. God knows, who can say in a world like this?

What did you think of Sex Pistols reunion?

I was for it, because I'm a Glenn Matlock fan. Remember nine-tenths of their career was with Glenn Matlock, and hey, he wrote the tune to "Anarchy in the UK." You gotta have a tune, you can't just shout gibberish. So when Glenn got back up whenever it was, I was well into it. To me, it was the revenge of Glenn Matlock. 'Cause he was sacked in not-a-nice way - a sort of publicly humiliating way. I think the word was, "He likes the Beatles." So he got sacked!

I'd like to see somebody try and beat the Beatles. Many people have tried.

What do you think of music today? Who do you like?

I'm into all the new punk. I like to hear Green Day on the radio. It's a lot better than the other shit they play in England, let me tell you that. I just toured with Offspring and got really tight with them. And my favorite group of the moment is Hepcat, from LA. They're the best ska band ever born in the United States of America - bar none. They are proper. If they split up I'm gonna be pissed right off. I'm gonna fucking have a right depression. I just toured with

up, I'm gonna be pissed right off. I'm gonna fucking have a right depression. I just toured with them in Europe, we tried to get them to tour with us here, but they're in the studio now.

What's it like for you going back on the road? Is it easier this time?

In a way it's easier because you know what to not waste your energy on. Like you have to keep your energy intact so you've got it when you arrive onstage.

What do you do - go to bed early? Eat right?

Well, I try and go to bed early. The emphasis on try, here. 'Cause I'm a bat. I'm a night person. So I do find that difficult. But yeah, cause you can't sleep anyway after a show no matter who you are. So that's sort of a big problem. Try and eat right, don't mix your drinks, don't talk too much. Don't smoke too many cigarettes. Keep your mind on the job, always think about tomorrow's set today. That's the kicker. Writing a set - I wrote all the set lists for the Clash - which might not seem like much, but I decided which songs we were gonna play and in what order every night. I would wait for the inspiration. It's almost like writing a poem.

Well yeah, you control the whole mood of the crowd.

Exactly. Yeah. It's almost like you've got to think slightly forward into the future or get an intuitive feeling for what it's going to be like. I try and think of the set list as early as I can. Then when I arrive in the town and see the venue, I go out in the street and I clock people hanging about or pick up a newspaper or the local rag and get into the vibe of the city, listen to the radio a bit. Then you can put it together for that night. I really like to write a new set every night. The only nights we don't is when we're so tired and we've done three in a row and we've got an eighteen-hour bus ride and we gotta play that set again cause I don't have the mental force to make a new set. That's what keeps it interesting on the road, building a set. And changing it.

How do you manage to keep this sense of idealism or naivete? Or am I wrong about you?

Yeah absolutely. You got it there. You've gotta be slightly stupid. You've got to be.

You think that's stupidity???

Yeah, I mean that. I sometimes look at myself, I'm sitting with a biro and a cigarette packet, desperately scrawling dribble on it. And sometimes I put down my fag pack and think, what am I, a grown man, doing at this hour of the night? Then I banish that thought, pick the fag pack up again. It ain't rocket science that's for sure. But it is good.

But how do you maintain that? With the contract disputes and all you've gone through?

Yeah, but it was good because I knew that I was keeping my powder dry. Long as I kept my mind. It helps cause I like to smoke weed... You know? That kinda helped me a lot. It was almost like my Prozac. Yeah? Chill out on the weed.

I just knew if I could keep my mind more or less sane, not get bitter, that's what I wanted to avoid. Getting like, "Oh, they did me over, sob, sob, sob" in the corner. There's no way out of that. It's like a vortex. I knew it would be living death to do that so I just tried to blame everything on myself, which is probably very appropriate.

You really feel that way?

Yeah, a lot of people are avoid blaming themselves for their misfortunes.

We do live in a culture of victims...

That's how I maintained my sanity - giving it to myself hard. Learning a little from it. When you blame yourself, you learn from it. If you blame someone else, you don't learn nothing, cause hey, it's not your fault, it's his fault, over there. That is the hardest thing of all. That's a grown-up. You've gotta grow up in this world. This world's full of kids playing with their bloody Playstations - and I mean grown-up executives. What is that shit? I know thousands of people my age, sitting around with those. What the fuck are you doing? We should be talking about Dostoyevsky, innit?

How did you make peace again with the other Clash guys?

Let time go by is a big thing. Let it fester a while, and they're men too. We hang out now and we get on, and our kids know each other. And hey, we've got things to do.

How's Topper doing now?

He's doing good. He's on the comeback trail. I talked to him last week in Dover and he's definitely climbing that mountain. He's fighting his drug addiction - he's fighting it right now at this minute.

It's so hard.

The hardest struggle of all. He's doing it this minute.

I work with heroin addicts, that's my job, but I'm quitting it soon.

It must be so wearing on you. Oh no Judy, then you're gonna run out of emotion. Compassion fatigue is gonna hit you if it hasn't already. There's only so much you can take on. God, that thing is everywhere. Heroin is everywhere. I just been in Italy, I just been in France, there's just no end to it. I don't know how we're gonna get out of it.

The US has such fucked drug policies - I don't know what it's like in the U.K.

It's a bit better than here, but the penny is beginning to drop, surely. Rehabilitation is better than punitive - you know, it's a physical necessity to have some heroin when you're on it. It should be recognized.

If people were more realistic about it and didn't think of users as bad..

Exactly. The governments are two hundred years behind the times. It's a shame for the rest of us. It's the same in England.

I'm glad he's doing better because he's a fucking amazing drummer.

He's the best. I mean, I hated it when we sacked him. The day the Clash died was the day we sacked him.

What's it like working with all these youngsters in the Mescaleros - they're so young and cute?

They are cute, aren't they?

They're adorable.

They're great fun 'cause not only you have to have respect for the players that they are, but we regularly run twenty-eight-hour bus rides. From say London to Bologna, we do that quite often. You're really in a submarine with guys for twenty-eight hours non-stop with two drivers. We don't stop, so you have to get on.

How did you find them?

Well, we didn't do it by luck, we did it by judgment. Because I'd been trying to get things together with Richard Norris, who's an acid house guy. Three of the songs on the record are from this project that me and him tried to get together four years ago that we crash-landed. But at least the songs survived. So, from doing those sessions over the last four years really, in London, I began to see who was who in the scene. Pablo Cook, caught onto him early, the percussion guy... and then Martin Slattery I knew from watching him in Black Grape and he introduced me Scott Shields, then we went out and found Smiley and we had a group. We did it from knowing - Anthony Genn is my co-collaborator on this - on equal footing. We collaborate, it's not me giving orders. I like to work with someone and he knew everyone in town.

What do you like about collaborating?

I can't do it alone.

Do you find the songs are better?

Really, you see, when you strip yourself down to your essence, when you're questioning yourself you gotta realize what is your strength and play to your strength. In order to play to your strength you gotta realize what they are. And I am a lyrical specialist. I can knock a tune out, which I do occasionally, like "London Calling," or whatever. But really, I'm not a tunesmith. It's like Rogers and Hammerstein. Occasionally someone comes down the pike that can do it alone like Cole Porter or Prince, but I definitely need my tunesmith with me.

What are your favorites on the record?

I hate to say it - I like it all. Because we really sat down before we started and said, we're gonna make a record worth having from beginning to end. And that's why limited it to ten tracks, which is the exact running time of a vinyl album: Forty four minutes. Even though it goes on for seventy three minutes on the CD nonsense, that don't mean to say you should stuff it full of guff. Cause people have got busy lives, they haven't got time to sit around listening to your guff. They wanna hear the news and then they want to get out the door. People got things to do. And so I think it's a strong record cause we hammered it down to the ten tracks and we made sure they were great and then we put them down on the record. Done.

The first time I heard it I heard it live and when I first heard the name of the song "Techno DJ" I was kind of taken aback. But it's good and catchy. I was so happy that night. My friend who I went with was laughing at me because I wasn't drinking or anything, but I was so happy I was going la, la, la!

Great, fantastic, thanks for saying that, Judy.

Steve wants me to stop, but I need to know what happened with your teeth.

Oh teeth, I just couldn't be bothered to clean them. I know it's sort of a gift from God, you get some teeth. I just couldn't be - cost me money to put teeth in my mouth.

I just got some fakes too. No one in America had fucked-up teeth and you were my bad teeth hero.

That's true. Absolutely no one in America.

Yeah, when I met Shane MacGowan I told him my teeth were fucked up like his, but then he opened his mouth and he was the pretty clear winner.

He won. He wins. It also goes into your brain. When the teeth rot it can really affect your whole body and it's not just the tooth, it can get into the blood and you know, it's a heavy thing. I had some fucked up teeth.

Did you have dreams after you had it done, that they all fell out?

Yeah, also I came round when they were in there - 'cause I got a really hard head. It takes a lot of booze to knock me out, yeah, and I kept coming 'round in the middle of it. See we bloody suffered for our neglect, that's for sure.

Okay, Steve really wants me to go, but first - I read this thing you said to Mikal Gilmore a long time ago: "Real rebellion is not giving up?" Did you ever feel like giving up?

No. See, I got to give some of my lineage here. My mother's from the north of the north of Scotland. We're called Picts. The Romans built two walls all the way across England - two walls, all the way across - just to keep my people out. These walls go for hundreds of miles - that took some building. I feel proud when I see Hadrian's wall cause that wall was built to keep my forefathers out and it shows what motherfuckers we are. I will never give up. Sometimes I feel like it, but never have I ever thought of giving up. Even in the dark days. There was something going on, like a little spark that kept me sane. If I hadn't had that I would've gone into self-pity and misery, but it's because of my mother's blood that I never will give up.

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